



Roots and Resistance: Ecofeminist Voices from Kerala

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ABSTRACT

Mainstream development models and state-led policy initiatives have significantly shaped debates on women and the environment, particularly within the global and Indian women's movements. This paper examines the theoretical and practical dimensions of the gender–environment relationship through the lenses of ecofeminism and feminist environmentalism, situating them within the context of environmental movements in India. Ecofeminism highlights the ideological and spiritual links between women and nature, viewing both as historically oppressed under patriarchal and capitalist systems. This perspective emphasizes women's perceived closeness to nature, often grounded in biological, cultural, and spiritual arguments, and interprets environmental degradation as parallel to the domination of women. In contrast, Bina Agarwal's feminist environmentalism offers a materialist and structural critique, foregrounding gendered divisions of labour, access to resources, and class- and caste-based inequalities. Rather than essentializing women as natural custodians of the environment, this approach explains women's environmental concerns through their everyday dependence on natural resources for survival and livelihood. The paper further contextualizes these theoretical debates by examining key environmental movements, such as the Chipko Movement, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, and the Green Belt Movement, led by Wangari Maathai. Special emphasis is placed on



ecofeminist narratives from Kerala, including the Plachimada struggle, Save Silent Valley Movement, and the ongoing Athirappilly agitation, where women—particularly adivasi women—have played decisive leadership roles. These movements demonstrate that women's environmental resistance is rooted less in abstract spirituality and more in material realities of survival, displacement, and environmental justice. Collectively, the study argues that Indian environmental movements are understood through feminist environmentalism, which captures the complex, gendered dynamics of development, ecology, and power.

Introduction

The mainstream development model and policy initiatives have had a significant impact on the discussions surrounding women and the environment, particularly within the global women's movement and the relationship between women and the environment in women's policies. It is an effort to comprehend the dynamics of the relationship between nature and women. The theory of ecofeminism is the primary focus. An attempt is made to investigate theoretical comprehension of the concepts of "Ecofeminism" and "Feminist environmentalism," which address the spiritual as well as the political thread linked with it, in light of the numerous environmental movements occurring in India.

With its various points of view, most of which are yet undefined, ecofeminism is a field of study that represents various stances within the feminist movement in the West. However, this branch's body of knowledge is still developing but carries greater advocacy (Agarwal, 1992). Stated differently, ecofeminism is a broad movement of women to save the environment or a social and political movement that combines feminism and ecology. According to Agarwal's writings on the gender and environmental conflict, the ecofeminist ideology acknowledges and examines the link between actions that hurt the environment and actions that oppress women. In the social climate, men are primarily seen as governing nature and women. Both of these groups are regarded as oppressed, and they also tend to care for one another in mutual relationships.

In her 1974 book "Le Feminism Soula Mort," Françoise Euabonnein coined the term "ecofeminism" (Shiva and Mies, 1993). Sherry Ortner was the first to introduce the idea that women are more in tune with nature into the current feminist discourse. She maintained that the biological process of reproduction



was the obvious source of the relationship between women and nature. Most theorists today agree that women's biological traits are what ideologically position them as more in tune with nature. People often view ecofeminism as a subset of the environmental movement. Therefore, to save the environment, the ecological movement must destroy patriarchal systems and beliefs.

Ecofeminism and Feminist Environmentalism at a glance.

Shiva's writings on ecofeminism focus more on the spiritual aspect, explaining how women relate to the environment spiritually and how they view it as a manifestation of their goddesses. The identification of nature strengthens Shiva's spiritual strand, including the trees, rivers, and Earth, as the goddess. Based on this, the Ganges, Kaveri, and Narmada rivers can be readily regarded as feminine. In addition, she is introducing a "political strand" (ibid) in her theory, which connects it to a movement arising as a response to the disruption of the religious strand. The literature that emerged in 1098 follows a common argument in ecofeminism, which posits that women are more conservative than men. This literature links this special attachment of women towards nature with cultural aspects and women's bodies. In this case, they are linking biological changes, such as menstruation, pregnancy, and child rearing, with the seasonal changes of nature. Shiva's writings also explore the concept of 'Mother Earth,' which views the Earth as a mother; here, the Earth is treated as a feminine entity. Apart from Shiva, Medha Patkar also shares a similar concern for nature; she considers nature as female and links it with her interaction with a male-dominant society (Shiva and Mies 1993). The women's existence in day-to-day life is a struggle with the patriarchal world, and the exploitation of nature by the capitalist power can also be viewed as the enforcement of power over Mother Earth. Considering the Earth as our mother is a newly emerging concept; local women from our surroundings also treat it as 'Mata' and worship Bhoomi Matha before starting any new venture on the Earth, which is common among villagers. In an interview, during Narmada Bachao Andolan, the environmental activist Medha Patkar said-

"The concept of womanhood of mate (mother) has automatically got connected with this whole movement, although the concept of Narmada as 'mate' is very much part of it. So, if the feminine tone is given, both to the leadership and participants----then(it all)comes together" (Sen. 1992:294)

Judith Plant (1989) advances similar arguments in her writings. She points out that men's violent attitudes, particularly in hunting and killing, strengthen these arguments. In her works, Plant equates untouched women with undisturbed nature, using the concept of virginity as a symbol for both. She also



likens the exploitation of nature to 'rape'. In addition to the biological and spiritual strands of ecofeminism discussed by Shiva, Miens, and Sale, the Indian social scientist and economist Bina Agarwal has written extensively on the relationship between gender and the environment. Agarwal's perspective on this issue provides a distinct understanding of the gender-environment debate. She introduced an alternative theory, popularly known as 'feminist environmentalism' (Agarwal 1992). In this feminist environmental theory, the gender-environment discourse is viewed not through spiritual and ideological lenses but as a structured relationship that considers caste, class, and race in connection with resources, as well as production and reproduction aspects (ibid). This suggests that the theory prioritizes labor considerations over spiritual aspects. The connections between men and women and their environment are profoundly linked to the labour in which they engage. This specific gender relation is analysed based on the division of labour. For clarity, Agarwal's alternative theory of feminist environmentalism recognises that –

".....both women and men would have an interest in forest conservation and regeneration, but their interest would stem from different (and at times conflicting) concerns, rooted in their respective responsibilities and the nature and intensity of their dependence on these resources. Men's interest can be traced mainly to their need for small timber for agricultural tools and logs for house construction and repairs, which are their responsibility. Women's interests are linked more to the availability of fuel, fodder, and seasonal NWFPs, for which they are more directly responsible" (Agarwal 2010:42).

The relationship between men, women, and nature is defined purely on the basis of the labour they are engaging in. She talks about the gender division of labour, considering the household work as the responsibility of women and other work related to 'forest' as requiring more physical power. Usually, men are engaged in tasks such as cutting down large trees, constructing houses, and cutting rocks, considering it their prime responsibility. Instead of considering women as the prime custodians of the forest, she believes that both men and women have different kinds of understanding of nature. The concern emerged among women based on the nature of the labour they are engaging in (ibid).

While tracing the gender ecology relationship, one should never forget the contribution of Wangari Muta Maathai, the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize for their contribution to sustainable development and peace. She was the first woman in East and Central Africa to attain a PhD. The Green Belt Movement, started by Maathai in 1977, was an initiative to bring environmental concerns to the grassroots level. It was a holistic approach to addressing the issues of environmental conservation and



poverty in Kenya. Through tree seeding in almost all the villages, it created income opportunities for the rural farmers who were previously deprived of employment and poverty. Wangari Maathai believed that trees have a personality and help change the landscape, thereby changing people's minds towards conservation. By keeping this basic idea in mind, she started the Green Belt Movement alongside rural farmers and trained village women to grow the seeds. As a result, they could plant millions of trees in the degraded areas of Kenya, thereby preventing soil erosion and water scarcity. Before that, African women walked miles to collect drinking water, which was often not even clean. Following the movement, water scarcity in the region came to an end, and clean drinking water became accessible to rural households. With the tree planting investment, the women in that particular area began self-employment activities such as farming, sheep rearing, and beekeeping. These interventions made them self-sufficient to lead their life.

Along with this, Maathai strongly opposed the state's exploitation of natural resources, successfully connecting the relationship between environmental degradation and poverty, and began working for her people, particularly for women and their rights. The Green Belt Movement planted over thirty million trees, which ultimately provided food, wood, and a life-supporting income, leading to the fulfillment of household needs and the education of children. Later, the trees became the symbol of democratic challenges in Kenya.

In the history of the ecofeminist Movement in India, the famous Chipko movement began in the central Himalayas, emerging as a protest against granting permission to commercial timber operators to access the forest, where local people were previously denied access for agricultural activities. The people's resistance by hugging the trees was a foremost example of the ecofeminism movement. The presence of a large number of women in the forest action (Protest can be used instead of this) and their increased participation have resulted in it becoming a women's movement. As the backbone of the Uttaranchal agrarian economy, women were most directly affected by environmental degradation and deforestation, and thus connected to the issue most easily.

The Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save Narmada Movement), which was initiated against the construction of two large proposed dams, Sardar Sarovar and Narmada Sagar, led by Medha Patkar, also holds an essential place in the Indian ecofeminist movement. In Narmada Bachao Andolan, the dam forced the displacement of about a million people and affected many more, largely poor peasants and tribals. It has also paved the way for ecological destruction. The movement carried out by the masses is a milestone in



the history of ecofeminism in India. All these movements demonstrate the connection women have with nature, whether due to biological or historical reasons.

Voices and narratives from Kerala's ecofeminist movement

The role played by women in environmental movements will be even clearer if we analyze the situation in Kerala, as it provides a list of environmental movements, especially those led by women and adivasis. Various movements led by the adivasis are marked in the history of Kerala's ecological movements. The Save Silent Valley Movement, Muthanga Land Reform Movement, Chaliyar River Agitation, Struggle against Industrial Pollution in the Eloor-Edayar region of Ernakulam District, Kathikudam Agitation against Nita Gelatin Company, and the ongoing struggle against the proposed Athirappilly Hydroelectric project in Thrissur District are among the significant ones. As far as Kerala is concerned, the movements, whether they be political or environmental, gradually create a platform for discussion in the mainstream. The environmental awareness among people sparks debates on related issues in its active form. As a highly literate state, the people of Kerala are highly concerned about environmental conservation. The major movements that have occurred against development interventions, namely the Plachimada struggle, the Save Silent Valley Movement, and the ongoing tribal movement against the Athirappilly Hydroelectric projects, are discussed here, and the important aspects of these movements are analyzed.

The Plachimada Agitation

In the history of Kerala's environmental movements, the Plachimada struggle is known by the name of the great tribal woman, "Mayilamma". It was Mayilamma who led the movement in the forefront. The Plachimada movement was carried out by the villagers of Perumatty panchayat in Palakkad district, Kerala, against the overexploitation of drinking water by the Coca-Cola company. The Plachimada hamlet is situated around 5 km from the border area of Tamil Nadu. Most of the Tamil migrants work as wage labourers in the Plachimada area, and many have become permanent residents of Perumatty Panchayat. The two tribal communities, Marasar and Eravalur, are the people who are directly affected by Hindustan Coca-Cola Holding Private Limited, along with the villagers. According to a study conducted by Jananeethi in 2003, nearly 1,000 Malasar and 19 Eravalur tribal families faced an acute water shortage (Wramner, 2004), and the number of villages affected by the factory is even higher than this. They had never experienced any kind of water scarcity before and had never gone outside to fetch drinking water. However, the operations of the Coca-Cola factory exacerbated the situation, and



gradually, the unrest among the people evolved into a mass movement against the Hindustan Coca-Cola Holding Company.

The Hindustan Coca-Cola company excessively exploited groundwater and extracted nearly one million liters of water from the village through bore wells and open wells. As a result, the overexploitation leads to the scarcity of drinking water in the surrounding areas. The 15 hectares of land used for the factory construction were a rich, multi-cropped paddy field that significantly impacted the villagers' food crops. The wells and natural water sources become dry, and the remaining water becomes polluted. Along with the drinking water, it also directly affected the agricultural sector. So, the villagers and the adivasis in the Plachimada area started agitation against the company in April 2002. Mayilamma, a tribal woman from the Eravalar tribal community, led the movement with the support of numerous tribal and non-tribal villagers. She herself faced the issues of drinking water scarcity, and she had played an essential role in the movement. The agitation was mainly led under the leadership of Mayilamma, who was the founder of the Anti-Coca-Cola Struggle Committee. As a result of the movement, the company permanently shut down its branch in 2004. Later, she became a well-known Indian social activist recognised by Indian and International organisations.

Save Silent Valley Movement

The Save Silent Valley Movement is another landmark in Kerala's environmental history. It is also considered a social movement for the protection of Silent Valley, a tropical evergreen forest in the Palakkad district of Kerala. It started in 1973 to save the Silent Valley Forest from being flooded by a Hydroelectric project. As a result of the movement, the entire valley was declared a Silent Valley National Park in 1985. Nonetheless, the controversy surrounding the valley persists. The Kunthippuzha is a major river that flows approximately 15 kilometres southwest of Silent Valley. It originates from the lush green forests; this area was identified as an ideal spot for constructing a hydroelectric project across the Kunthippuzha. Based on studies, it was identified as a suitable area for a hydroelectric project with a capacity of 120 megawatts and a cost of ₹ 17 crores. After the announcement of the project, the area became a focal point of the Save Silent Valley debate, India's most significant environmental debate of the decade.

The entire discussion about the SSV centered on the lion-tailed macaque species. Later, the issue gained mass public attention. Romulus Whitaker, founder of the Madras Snake Park and the Madras Crocodile Bank, was probably the first person to draw public attention to the project in small and remote areas. In



1977, the Kerala Research Institute conducted an ecological impact study of the specific location and proposed that it be declared a biosphere reserve. In 1978, Smt. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, approved the project with the condition that the state government enact legislation to ensure the necessary safeguards. The state government removed the area from the list of protected regions and proceeded with implementing the project.

Like the Plachimada movement, the KSSP (Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad) also played a significant role in SSVM. They drew huge public attention to this issue. They also published techno-economic and socio-political assessments on the Silent Valley Hydroelectric Project. The activist poet Sugathakumari also played an essential role in leading the movement. Her work, 'MarathinuStuti' (Praise the tree), formed a symbol for the protest from the intellectual community. The poem became the opening song and prayer of most SSVM campaign meetings. Dr. Salim Ali, the eminent ornithologist of the Bombay Natural History Society, visited the valley and appealed for the cancellation of the project. A petition for a writ was filed before the Kerala High Court against the mass cutting of forests in the area; later, the high court stopped the clear-cutting. Later, the state government declared the area a national park by excluding the project area. The Dr. MGK Menon committee suggested that the project is not feasible without any potential ecological damage. He submitted the same report to the prime minister, and she abandoned the project. On November 15, the Silent Valley forests were declared a National park. They were inaugurated by the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and were designated as the core area of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve.

The ongoing Athirappilly movement

In recent times, the Kerala state government has focused more on its development by implementing various projects. They are giving more emphasis on building dams and hydroelectric power projects in order to overcome electricity scarcity. The ongoing Athirappilly movement is a protest by the Adivasi communities against the proposed hydroelectric project by the Kerala State Electricity Board. Athirappilly is a forest area located in the Western Ghats region of Kerala, in Thrissur district (CPF, 2007). The project was proposed by the KSEB decades ago, and the Kadar communities inhabiting that area are strongly opposing the project because they will be the immediate victims of the project once it is implemented. Kadar are one among the primitive communities and are significantly less in number. The 2001 census report (GoI, 2001) states that the total number of the Kadar population is 2021. The Kadar, who depend entirely on the forest and forest dwelling activities are totally against the proposed hydroelectric project in their locality. The Athirappilly and Vazhachal areas, where the project is proposed, are a rich biodiversity spot where rare species are found. The Kadar settled in that area will be



under the threat of displacement. They are already victims of several development interventions and their ancestors were forced to leave their locality in the name of development (CPF 2007) and they have been exploited since the colonial period in the name of various minor dam projects. Again and again, they are forced to bear the cost of development without any returns. Eventually, in 1982, the Athirappilly project was proposed by the KSEB, and they again started facing all these threats. It would create a complete imbalance in the lives of tribal communities, as well as in the flora and fauna, and also in the lives of people who depend directly and indirectly on the Chalakudi River for their agriculture, irrigation, and drinking water.

It was under the leadership of a tribal woman, Geeta, that the Kadar led the movement. She could organise a large number of tribal women against the project. Her House is located near the Vazhachal waterfall area, in the Vazhachal forest division. She is the first woman to have completed SSLC education in the Vazhachal settlement. She is one among the Kadar who has a higher educational qualification in her settlement. After completing her SSLC, she worked as an ST promoter from 1999 to 2002 and is currently working as an Anganwadi Worker in Vazhachal. She is the pioneer of the resistance movement against the project. She has a previous experience of victimisation due to project displacement. Her family had already experienced forced displacement due to the construction of electric projects in Peringalkuthu and the Sholayar dams. As a result, they lost their land, resources, and livelihood. They shifted from Sholayar to Vazhachal. Thus, her family became the settlers of the Vazhachal area, so she is not willing to be a victim of a development project in her future life. Because she has experienced the miseries of her ancestors and knows how much disaster it would bring about.

She is one of those who are strongly against the project. When the government announced the plan for the proposed project, she was at the forefront of mobilization and educated her community about the project's effects. Regarding the government interventions, she is very sceptical about the distribution of compensation packages. She said that the government offers several resettlement packages but often fails to deliver them to the affected people. She created awareness and was involved in the advocacy process among her tribe. She did not want her people to be cheated by the false promises of rehabilitation.

In October 2007, she filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the Kerala High Court. In PIL, she challenged the WAPCOS Environment Impact Assessment, emphasizing the importance of conserving the area, considering the relevance of biodiversity and the tribal population. Similarly, she has also challenged the techno-economic clearance granted to the project, arguing that it was based on inadequate research and impact analysis. She is resisting the project every day, which further marginalizes and



excludes them in society. She wants to ensure that all the Kadar participate in the fight against the project. As a result, the government concludes that it will never implement the project without the consent of the opposition.

Conclusion

The environmental movements in Green Belt, Chipco, Plachimada, or Athirapilly have emerged from the unrest of people against the exploitation of natural resources by various forces, especially those resulting from state development interventions. Therefore, the resistance that arose within the community is linked to their day-to-day interactions with nature. In almost all village societies, where fetching drinking water, collecting firewood and fodder, and gathering forest resources are the prime responsibilities of women, they can easily understand the changes occurring in their immediate environment. In this way, these movements emerged from such an understanding. Almost all these movements are directly linked to feminist environmentalism, which discusses the complex, gendered relationships between communities and nature, especially with their local resources. All these movements have emerged in response to the exploitation of nature by the state or by capitalist power. Here, rather than merely spiritual needs, the women in these movements recognised the material reality and stood against it. The vital element in understanding these movements is that they recognised it as a gender division of labour and power-based exploitation. With this understanding, they are fighting for environmental justice. India's rural household women's struggle must be considered a struggle for their survival, in addition to being a struggle to conserve natural resources.

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